

Rockville Mayor Pushes Renewal

By Edward S. Cohen

Washington Post Staff Writer

Frank A. Ecker is probably the Nation's only part-time mayor who also works at the CIA and wants to carry through a successful urban renewal plan for his city.

Mayor Ecker believes the survival of Rockville as a viable County seat and a decent place to live for perhaps a hundred thousand people depends on the \$10 million plan putting some life into a downtown commercial center.

Ten or fifteen years ago, Ecker said, it might have been easier. Since then, the encroachment of the suburban shopping centers and commercial complexes—Silver Spring, Bethesda, Wheaton and the Rockville Pike corridor to Washington — have changed rural Rockville.

But Ecker has doubts about whether developers would have looked twice at Rockville. Open land elsewhere in the County is less expensive. The main street of Rockville is now estimated at \$120,000 an acre.

So East Montgomery Avenue, with its decaying shake-like stores, is to be pulled up by its roots so that Rockville can redevelop by 1969 and possibly survive as a city in an age of grandiose shopping centers and suburban apartment development.

An attempt will be made to give Rockville more consumer appeal at modern stores, apartment buildings, garden apartments, underground parking and underground utilities—all in the downtown central area.

Hopefully, a large department store will settle there. Ecker indicates that much depends on a large store. He is aware of a study showing that only 36 per cent of Rockville's inhabitants buy non-expandable items locally.

Instead they go down the Pike to big new stores within short driving distances.

The plan is not designed to create competition with Bethesda or Wheaton but it would be nice to keep some

shoppers at home, Ecker added. But besides the commercial aspect, Ecker hopes that downtown Rockville is "not a place that closes its doors at 9 p.m. This is a place where people will live."

Being a county seat has given the city a certain distinction, Ecker said, but there should be an aesthetic attraction to go with that status. This means planning, and that was how the urban renewal plan evolved several years ago.

County officials do not agree with Ecker's approach. One said last week that, if the County were in charge, it would probably be no effort to rebuild the central city. "If Rockville had spent less time annexing lands and more time developing the inner city, this might not have happened," the official asserted.

But Ecker, mayor for three years and a budget official at CIA, is undaunted. He is sensitive of criticism from the County Council and does not like being called the "part-time mayor and his car-pool council."

Ecker says: "When we're finished, we'll have a modern downtown. And it is good for the County's point of view. Financially, the County is a beneficiary. I believe the County should have a good-looking viable county seat that's a good place to live."

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